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ABSTRACT

A study compared the results of a 1986 survey on the opinions of preservice teachers with those of a survey conducted in 1984 by William Bennett (at that time chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities). Bennett's survey asked respondents to list 30 works that students should be expected to read before high school graduation. "Macbeth" and "Hamlet" were listed by 71% of the 325 respondents to this survey, and 50% listed documents of U.S. history, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address. The 1986 survey sought responses from 44 preservice teachers enrolled at Mississippi State University; subjects were asked to list 10 works that students should be expected to read before high school graduation. A comparison of responses indicated that the preservice teachers felt more strongly about some of the works than those in Bennett's survey. More than half of the subjects listed the following five works: Hawthorne's "Scarlet Letter"; Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," "Hamlet," and "Macbeth"; and various U.S. government documents. Twenty of the works or authors listed in Bennett's survey were mentioned in the survey of education students. The choices of the preservice teachers seemed to refute the statement of some scholars that high school students may not be equipped to read sophisticated material. Most of the preservice teachers had been out of high school less than four years, yet indicated they believed in high school students' ability to read such books. (SRT)

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SCHOLARS AND PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS: A COMPARISON OF OPINIONS OF READING REQUIRED FOR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

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SCHOLARS AND PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS: A COMPARISON OF OPINIONS OF READING REQUIRED FOR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

In a 1984 seminar conducted by William J. Bennet, chairman for the National Endowment for the Humanities, was asked by a group of reporters for his opinion on whether there are some books that every student in the country "might reasonably be expected to have studied before he or she graduates from high school."

Bennet put the question to a list of experts of his own selection. In an informal and unscientific survey, he compiled responses from 325 people. Seventy-three people replied to his question, eighty-four responded to an article that syndicated columnist George Will devoted to the project, and one hundred sixty eight high school teachers who took part in a seminar sponsored in the summer of 1984 by the government agency and the Mellon Foundation also responded.

Some of those surveyed objected to the the project on the grounds that many high school students are not equipped to handle such sophisticated reading material. Daniel Bell, Harvard sociologist, disliked the idea of requiring students to read individual great works. He thought it more important to study how books or themes relate to one another. Novelist Robert Penn Warren stated that not one man out of hundred had read any of the titles mentioned in his list, which included the Book of Genesis, Charles

Darwin's "Origin of the Species" and Theodore Dreiser's "An American Tragedy." He wrote that better educated teachers, not a better curriculum, are needed.

Henry Steele Commager, Amherst College historian, stated that he wasn't persuaded of any correlation between particular readings and intelligence. "Modern political scientists read ten times as many books as did Madison and Hamilton, but they can't write the Federalist Papers. Lincoln's reading was more limited that Wilson's, but he did a better job of it."

In spite of the fact that not all of those contacted agreed with the survey. or the reasons for it, a list of the thirty works mentioned most often was compiled. Shakespeare's plays, especially "MacBeth" and "Hamlet," listed by seventy-one percent of the participants, were the only works listed by a majority. Fifty percent cited documents of U. S. history, such as the Declaration of Independence , the Constitution, and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

Following the works of Shakespeare, and the documents of the U.S. history , the most mentioned works were:

Huckleberry Finn, by Mark Twain.

The Bible

Homer's Odyssey

Charles Dickens' Great Expectations, and A Tale of Two Cities

Plato's Republic

John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath

Nathaniel Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter

Sophocles' Oedipus

Herman Melville's Moby Dick

George Orwell"s 1984

Henry David Thoreau's Walden

The poems of Robert Frost

Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass

F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby

Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales

Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto

Aristotle's Politics

The poems of Emily Dickenson

Feodor Dostoevski's Crime and Punishment

The novels of William Faulkner

J. D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye

Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America

Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice

Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays and poems

Niccolo Machiavelli's The Prince

John Milton's Paradise Lost

Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace

Vergil's Aeneid

In reviewing the thirty works selected in Bennet's 1984 survey, J. D. Salinger, born in 1919, was the only living author cited at that time. His "Catcher in the Rye" which appeared in 1951, was the latest publication on the list. George Orwell's death in 1950 left only Willam Faulkner, who died in 1962, Robert Frost, who died in 1963, and John Steinbeck, who died in 1966, to live into the second half of the twentieth century.

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY;

After reviewing the article reporting this survey, and taking into consideration some of the criticisms leveled at the schools for their inadequacies in teaching and "watered-down" curricula, a decision was made to compare the selections of pre-service teachers with those of Bennet's selected group. Specifically, a survey of pre-service teachers enrolled during the 1986 spring semester at Mississippi State University was planned for this comparison of opinions. Would the opinions of these students differ greatly from a selected group which included multiple Pulitzer Prize winner Robert Penn Warren, well-known sociologists, historians, scholars, and experienced teachers?

COLLECTION OF DATA:

Since Bennet's survey was "conducted informally and unscientifically," the comparison survey was conducted the same way. Subjects for the study were forty-four (44) preservice teachers enrolled in Language Arts Classes at Mississippi State University during the spring semester of 1986. The students were asked to list ten works they felt should be read by all high school students before graduation. The works to be listed could be either literary selections or documents of importance. At the time of the request there was no discussion of the works, so that the statements of each of the subjects would be unaffected by any statement made by anyone in class. After their selection, the results were tallied, and compared with the results of Bennet's survey.

RESULTS OF THE SURVEY:

The survey of the pre-service teachers indicated that they felt more strongly about some of the works than those in the 1984 survey. More than half of the subjects surveyed listed the following five works:

Nathaniel Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter (72%)

Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet (72%)
Hamlet (57%)
MacBeth (56%)

U. S. Government Documents (54%)
Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights, Constitution, and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

The works of Charles Dickens were named by fifty percent (50%) of those surveyed. These works included A Tale of Two Cities, Great Expectations, David Copperfield, Oliver Twist.

The following works were named by more than a third of the pre-service teachers:

Beowulf (The oldest epic in the English language)	42%
Chaucer's Canterbury Tales	38%
George Orwell's 1984 and Animal Farm	36%
Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn	34%

The following received multiple citings:

William Faulkner. Titles listed were As I Lay Dying, The Sound and the Fury, The Reivers, and The Long Hot Summer. Some made a generalized statement about reading Faulkner's works.

John Steinbeck. Titles listed were Grapes of Wrath, Winter of Our Discontent, The Pearl, and Of Mice and Men,

Works of Edgar Allen Poe

Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind

Stephen Crane's The Red Badge of Courage and The Open Boat

F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby

Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird

John Milton's Paradise Lost

The Bible

Homer's The Iliad and The Odyssey

Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace

Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman

Ernest Hemingway's works

Tennessee Williams' works

H. G. Wells' War of the Worlds and The Time Machine

James Fenimore Cooper's Last of the Mohicans

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Herman Melville's Moby Dick

The poems of Robert Frost

The works of Eudora Welty

IMPLICATIONS OF THE SURVEY COMPARISONS:

When the data had been compiled, twenty of the works or authors listed in Bennet's survey had been mentioned in the survey of forty-four university students, most of whom are graduates of Mississippi high schools. Uncited authors include Aristotle, Plato, Dostoevski, Austen, Emerson, Marx. Vergil, Whitman, Thoreau, and de Tocqueville.

Authors cited in the current survey, but uncited in the 1984 survey, include Stephen Crane, whose Red Badge of Courage is still a monumental work depicting the young soldier whose romantic illusions

of war are so brutally shattered by the reality of war's confusion and bloodshed. Unmentioned in the earlier survey is Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird, which won the Pulitzer Prize for 1961. Pulitzer Prize winners Arthur Miller, for Death of a Salesman, Eudora Welty for The Optomist's Daughter, and Margaret Mitchell, for Gone With the Wind, were not cited in the earlier study. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and James Fenimore Cooper, whose works have been included in literature classes for decades were excluded from the earlier study, as was Beowulf, the oldest epic in the English language.

Some books less frequently mentioned than those on the list included The Diary of Anne Frank, John Gunther's Death Be Not Proud, T. H. White's Once and Future King, Anne Moody's Coming of Age in Mississippi, John Howard Griffin's Black Like Me, and Armstong's Sperry's Call It Courage.

Some of these books may not be in the class with Vergil's twelve-book series, Aeneid, still the most loved of the Roman poets, nor the works of Sophocles or Plato, but few of them could really be called frivolous or light reading. Most of the books deal with meeting challenges, and in that sense perhaps these choices show a seriousness on the part of the younger readers that has not been fully understood, nor appreciated.

One participant wrote on her paper that no books should really be required. The books should be made available, and the students should be able to select a required number of books, but books of their own choice. The statement is in agreement with Commager's statement that particular readings are not as important as what one does with the readings.

Several of those surveyed mentioned that they did not include the Bible on their list, although they thought everyone should read the Bible at home and in church. They did not believe that it should become a controversial subject in the school.

CONCLUSIONS;

This study was designed to compare the choices of literature and or documents of importance selected by a group of forty-four preservice teachers with a group of 325 scholars and experts chosen by William J. Bennet, the 1984 Chairman for the National Endowment for the Humanities, now Secretary of Education. In the Bennet survey, thirty works that high school students could "reasonably be expected to have read before graduation" were listed. In the survey done with the preservice teachers, twenty of the works, or other works by authors listed in the first survey, were included. Works cited only in the second survey included Beowulf, the oldest epic in the English language, works by a number of Pulitzer Prize winners, and works dealing with a variety and wide scope and depth of challlenges.

The choices of the preservice teachers seem to refute the statement of the scholars that high school students may not be equipped to read sophisticated material. Most of the preservice teachers have been out of high school less than four years, and they believe in the ability of the high school student to read some sophisticated matter. Indications from this study are that preservice teachers are better educated than many have realized.

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This study was based on the following article:

"Students Offered Heavy Reading" Dateline: Washington, D. C. Associated Press Release. The Daily Oklahoman, Sunday, August 12, 1984. P. 1-A, 2.